

NEWS RELEASE

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PADDLEFISH ANGLERS CAUTIONED; AGENCIES SEEK TO PROTECT PALLID STURGEON

Paddlefish and river anglers in North Dakota and eastern Montana need to be on alert this year, especially this spring.

“While out paddlefish snagging or fishing, you could have an endangered pallid sturgeon on your line”, explains U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Steve Krentz of Bismarck. “We believe there may be only 250 pallid sturgeon left in North Dakota and northeastern Montana, and we can’t afford to lose any of them.”

“Our three primary concerns are the Missouri and Yellowstone River confluence, the area near Sundheim Park on the Yellowstone about five miles east of Fairview, Montana, and the area near Intake Diversion at Glendive,” notes Krentz. “These are some of the most popular spots for anglers to seek paddlefish, and recent reports indicate pallid sturgeon are occasionally caught at these locations.”

Krentz realizes the accidental snagging of these rare fish can’t be completely prevented. “We are just asking anglers to be positive it’s a paddlefish they have on the line before they use their gaff hook.” He adds that most pallid sturgeon can survive being snagged, but a gaff wound can be fatal.

Krentz has some advice for anyone who happens to snag or catch a pallid sturgeon. “Release the fish immediately and try to remove the hook as gently as possible,” he asks, “while keeping the fish in the water if you can. Please do not grab the gills, and if the fish must be removed from the water to facilitate hook removal, cradle the fish using both arms.” For anglers who happen to catch a pallid sturgeon while using standard fishing gear, Krentz suggests it may be better to cut the line rather than subject the fish to additional stress or dislodge a deeply set hook.

The law is on the rare fish’s side. Fred Ryckman, district fisheries biologist for the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, reminds anglers of certain restrictions. “Any angler catching a sturgeon in North Dakota must return it to the water immediately,” he says, “and we’d like them to contact us at 701-774-4320 in Williston or the Fish and Wildlife Service in Bismarck at 701-250-4419 if they find any sturgeon larger than 30 inches or 15 pounds.” He adds that it is illegal for anglers to possess any gaff for one-half mile either side of the Highway 200 bridge on the Yellowstone River.

It's a similar situation in Montana with the exception that paddlefish snaggers are not allowed to use a gaff. Brad Schmitz, regional fishery manager for the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department, reminds anglers that all snagged sturgeon must be immediately released. He adds, "Please release the fish back to the water, and if you think you caught a pallid sturgeon, contact us at 406-232-0900 in Miles City."

Pallid sturgeon, somewhat similar in size and appearance to paddlefish, can be distinguished by the bony plates located along their backs, large sucker-type mouth and the long, whisker-like barbels located in front of their mouth.

The North Dakota paddlefish season runs from May 1 through June 15, while the Montana season is May 1-June 30 on the Yellowstone River below Cottonwood Creek (about four miles below Intake), and May 15-June 30 from the Bighorn River to Cottonwood Creek. The Missouri River in Montana, both above and below Ft. Peck Reservoir, is open year-around to paddlefish angling.

Anyone interested in learning more about the pallid sturgeon recovery program can call the Fish and Wildlife Service in Bismarck, 701-250-4419, or access the web site at <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/moriver>

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